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SUBJECT: PRT ANBAR: SUNNI ENDOWMENT TO SUPPORT ELECTIONS FROM THE  
PULPIT

(U) Classified by:

11. (U) This is a PRT Anbar (Ramadi) cable.

12. (U) SUMMARY: Sheikh Riyadh Ziad al-Zobayee, a religious sheikh and deputy head of the Sunni Endowment in Anbar, briefed PRT on the Endowment's current and future activities in support of the electoral process. Among several efforts by the Endowment, Sheikh Riyadh has written a program of sermons on the religious duty of Muslims to participate in the elections, which he plans to disseminate for use in November. Riyadh is committed to using mosques to encourage peaceful participation in the electoral process.

ANBARIS WILL VOTE, BOTH MEN AND WOMEN  
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13. (U) The PRT Team Leader, POLOFF, and MNF-W G9 Engagement Officer met with Sheikh Riyadh on October 10, in order to hear the Sunni Endowment's perspective on the current political situation and seek the Endowment's assistance in encouraging Anbaris to vote. Sheikh Riyadh stated that he believed that at least 70-75 percent of Anbaris would vote in the next election because they had learned a harsh lesson from boycotting the last national election. To encourage Anbaris to get out and vote, Sheikh Riyadh said that he had given over twenty sermons on the importance of voting, women's participation in the political process and the cost of not having adequate representation in the government. Riyadh emphasized that women's full participation will be key to ensuring Sunni success at the polls. Noting that the Quran contains several passages that can be construed to make participation in elections a religious duty, Riyadh told PRToffs that he was looking to use some of these in a program of sermons that, after receiving the approval of the provincial governor, would be disseminated to all Anbari mosques for recitation from the pulpit.

IHEC NEEDS TO BE REFORMED  
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14. (U) Sheikh Riyadh asserted that the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) is not representative enough of the Iraqi body politic; it needs to include more Sunnis and political parties that have real influence (REF A).. He lamented the selfishness of Iraqi politicians in general, and IHEC officials specifically, and criticized IHEC's handling of the provincial elections earlier this year; he stated that voting information was disseminated at the last minute before elections and that much of the voter education material was useless to the many Anbaris who are illiterate. Moreover, because many party leaders support the closed list system, voters don't know who the candidates will ultimately be. Riyadh offered several ideas to address these complaints, among them mandating that party heads show their pictures next to individual candidates, so that voters know for whom they are voting. He went on to say that the Endowment is expressly apolitical, but conceded that the head of the Endowment, Sheik Ahmed Abdel Ghafour al-Sammaraie, joined a political party in order to work toward keeping religion out of national government.

"WE CAN BRAINWASH THEM BACK"  
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¶6. (U) Riyadh also related several other efforts by the Endowment to moderate the religious messages in mosques and disseminate teachings that counter Al-Qaeda-inspired violent jihad ideology. Riyadh stated that these insurgents have brainwashed many into espousing violent jihad, but he wants to "brainwash them back" into understanding that jihad can be the struggle to build their community, to build a school, and to do good. Riyadh indicated that he would soon submit a training program to the governor that covers the subject of reeducating those who have been taught an extremist ideology.

COMMENT

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¶7. (U) Religious leaders continue to play a significant and often helpful role in influencing the body politic in Iraq, as witnessed by Ayatollah Sistani's campaign to encourage open lists in the election law and voter participation amongst all communities (ref B). The Sunni Endowment appears to be a valuable partner in our efforts to educate and promote a peaceful and open election. For its efforts to counter extremist ideology, Anbar Governor Qasim has charged the Endowment with certifying the religious credentials and sermons of every imam in the province. Those who do not meet the Governor's standards are subject to arrest. Although the Endowment claims to be apolitical, its efforts, particularly with women's rights issues, appear to be motivated by the desire to increase Sunni voter turnout and representation in the national government. The PRT and MNF-W maintain a good relationship with the organization, as does the Sahwa movement, the provincial government, and other influential leaders in the province.

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